

2012–13 SENTINEL INFLUENZA SURVEILLANCE IN VIRGINIA:

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The purpose of influenza surveillance

What is accomplished by sentinel influenza surveillance in Virginia?

Sentinel influenza surveillance serves a number of purposes. As sentinel influenza surveillance data accumulates during the influenza season, state health officials combine this information with other data, such as absentee rates in public schools, in order to form a dynamic picture of influenza's impact among populations. During the flu season, rates of influenza infection are calculated and influenza activity levels are determined on a weekly basis. Additionally, the viral subtyping performed on these specimens provides insight into the predominant strains circulating at different points in the season. This can be very important in detecting and monitoring the emergence of novel influenza strains.

How are flu surveillance data used?

Public health officials use flu surveillance data to keep physicians, hospitals, and facilities such as nursing homes and schools better apprised of influenza activity around the state. This helps medical providers judge when influenza is likely to be in the community and to adjust their testing and treatment practices in response.

Should I send specimens every month, even when there isn't much flu activity?

Yes! Successful surveillance depends on sites sending two specimens each month, throughout the influenza season (October through May). For example, influenza activity during the last flu season was fairly light but VDH still required specimens to understand the level of influenza activity and type of virus strain circulation.

ILI: Case definition

What is the definition of influenza-like illness (ILI)?

For the purposes of sentinel influenza surveillance, an ILI case is defined by fever greater than 100°F along with cough and/or sore throat. A person presenting with these symptoms has ILI, and may be sampled for influenza surveillance, regardless of any rapid test result.

Obtaining specimens from patients with ILI

For detailed instructions on specimen collection, sentinel flu kits, and specimen shipping, [click here](#)

Why two specimens per month?

Based on the population of Virginia, influenza epidemiologists have estimated that specimens from two ILI patients each month, collected by two providers in each of the Virginia's 35 health districts, will provide adequate information about rates of influenza infection and help characterize the strains of influenza virus that are circulating.

How do I ask patients to volunteer a specimen for flu surveillance?

You can best gauge your patient's response to being asked to provide an influenza surveillance specimen; please just ensure that the patient's symptoms meet the ILI case definition. If you are obtaining a specimen for rapid testing, you may be able to use the NP swab from the sentinel flu surveillance for the rapid test (see below for more information) or you may be able to insert both swabs together into the nostril and thereby obtain two specimens at one time.

Rapid testing and sentinel flu testing

At our facility patients with ILI symptoms have a nasopharyngeal specimen taken for rapid testing for strep and for influenza. Is it possible to use that single specimen for sentinel surveillance too?

It *is* possible to split the fluid for several tests. You will need to use the NP swab and viral transport media provided for sentinel flu surveillance. Depending on the manufacturer of the rapid test used at your facility, the viral transport medium for flu surveillance may be suitable for rapid testing as well. Check the manufacturer's instructions; if further guidance is needed, please contact your health district's influenza surveillance coordinator.

[Click here](#) to see instructions for splitting a nasopharyngeal sample for rapid testing and surveillance virology.

Please keep in mind that virology testing at the state public health laboratory DCLS (Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services) will require a minimum of 0.6 ml of viral transport medium.

If we do a rapid test for flu and the result is negative, why should we still send a specimen for state flu surveillance?

Research has shown that rapid tests for influenza have a fairly high rate of false negative results; that is, the test will say that the patient does not have influenza, when in fact the patient *does* have influenza. For influenza surveillance, as long as the patient meets the criteria for influenza-like illness, VDH would like you to consider that patient a viable candidate for surveillance sampling.

The laboratory form and specimen label

What information is needed on the lab form and the label for the specimen?

[Please click here](#) for an annotated lab form for flu specimen collection and instructions for filling it out.

[Please click here](#) for an annotated specimen label and instructions for filling it out.

Shipping sentinel influenza specimens

[Please click here](#) for detailed instructions for specimen collection and transport.

How do I store specimens until I can call for shipment?

Place specimens in the refrigerator (at 4° C) until they can be placed in the styrofoam cooler for shipping. Do not freeze the specimens. Also note that the cold pack must be frozen at least 24 hours before being used for shipment. **DCLS must receive the sample within 72 hours of collection.**

How do I arrange for specimen pick up?

Call FedEx for a pick up at **1-800-463-3339**, or contact your Health Department Influenza Surveillance Coordinator regarding package drop off for delivery to the lab. **Do not ship on Friday or before a holiday.**

What about shipping around state holidays?

Virginia Department of Health and the state laboratory (DCLS) are closed on state holidays and on weekends. Transport of specimens occurs overnight; therefore, specimens should not be shipped before a state holiday (for example, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving). Likewise, specimens should not be shipped on Fridays, as the laboratory is closed to specimen receipt on weekends.

Whom do I call if I have a specimen-related question, problem, or shipping issue?

Call the laboratory, (804) 648-4480, extension 271 or 272. If the laboratory is unavailable, call your health district's influenza surveillance coordinator.

Use of surveillance data at my health care facility

Will I be able to use the surveillance testing data to diagnose and/or treat my patients?

You will receive a copy of the results from sentinel flu tests, but they will not be available within a time frame suitable for patient management.

Supplies of specimen collection kits

How do I order lab kits to replace the ones I send off each month?

The state laboratory (DCLS) will automatically send you a replacement kit each time you send in a specimen. If you don't receive a replacement specimen kit and mailing cooler within 2-3 weeks, please e-mail the Influenza Coordinator at flu@vdh.virginia.gov

Identifying patients for collection of influenza surveillance specimens

Where I work it's difficult to identify patients who should be sampled before they leave our facility. How can I address this problem?

Identifying patients, obtaining specimens, and coordinating shipping are a team effort. At the beginning of your work shift, remind your co-workers of the need to identify patients with ILI, and ask them to help you get the tasks done.

My co-workers are very busy and sometimes I get some resistance when I ask for help with flu surveillance tasks. How can I enlist my co-workers in the effort?

VDH can help. If your facility needs information or support, or an in-service on the importance of influenza surveillance, please e-mail the Influenza Coordinator at flu@vdh.virginia.gov or contact your health district Influenza Coordinator.